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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 001161

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SUBJECT: THE PRESIDENT'S JULY 16 SPEECH ON ARAB-ISRAELI
PEACE: GOM OFFERS INITIAL WELCOME, MOROCCAN MEDIA TEPID

REF: RABAT MEDIA REACTION 7/18/07

Classified by Polcouns Craig Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Mohammed Azeroual, Director-General for Arab and Islamic Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told polcouns on July 18 that Morocco "welcomed all initiatives" aimed at restarting the Arab-Israeli peace process and was eager to learn more about the modalities of the U.S. proposal unveiled by President Bush during his July 16 speech. When we tried to pass Azeroual a copy of the remarks, he opened a file that contained not only the text of the speech but a compilation of press reaction from around the region. Noting that the President had cited the participation of "neighboring states" in a peace conference, Azeroual flagged reports in the Israeli press that Morocco and Saudi Arabia would also be invited and asked if this was true.

¶2. (C) Azeroual stressed to polcouns that for the GOM, direct contacts with Israel were "no problem at all" and occurred on a "regular and systematic basis." The mid-July meeting of FM Benaissa and Israeli FM Livni in Paris was just the latest manifestation of these continuing contacts. Azeroual also drew attention to Arab League SYG Amr Moussa's statement of support following the President's speech, opining that it augured well, as this was not a personal statement but represented the League. Azeroual said Morocco looked forward to hearing more details of the U.S. proposal as the plan gets fleshed out.

¶3. (SBU) Reactions from the Moroccan media have been more tepid. To date, most of the coverage of the speech has been factual and low key. A few broadcast and print outlets have noted the negative reaction from Hamas, flagged criticism of the speech from Israeli commentators, and expressed doubt about the ability of a "lame duck" president to advance the process at this stage.

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